

U.S. COAST GUARD CUTTER BITTERSWEET
(WLB 389
WAGL 389)
U.S. Coast Guard Buoy Tenders, 180' Iris Class
Woods Hole vicinity
Barnstable County
Massachusetts

HAER No. MA-152

HAER
MASS,
I-WOOD.V,
1-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

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U.S. COAST GUARD CUTTER BITTERSWEET

HAER No. MA-152

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**RIG/TYPE
OF CRAFT:**

Cutter (Iris Class)

TRADE:

Buoy tending (government)

OFFICIAL NUMBER:

WLB-389 (WAGL-389)

**PRINCIPAL
DIMENSIONS:
(As built)**

Length: 180'
Beam: 37'
Depth: 12'
Displacement: 935 tons

LOCATION:

Estonia

**DATES OF
CONSTRUCTION:**

September 16, 1943 - May 11, 1944

DESIGNER:

Preliminary design by United States Coast Guard and final design by Marine Iron and Shipbuilding Corporation of Duluth, Minnesota

BUILDER:

Zenith Dredge Company of Duluth, Minnesota

PRESENT OWNER:

Government of Estonia

PRESENT USE:

Naval vessel

SIGNIFICANCE:

This vessel was built to serve as a 180' U.S. Coast Guard cutter. The federal government purchased or built thirty-nine of these vessels, built in three sub-classes, from 1942-1944. The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) designed the 180s to service Aids-to-Navigation (AtoN), perform Search and Rescue missions (SAR), carry out Law Enforcement duties (LE), and conduct ice-breaking operations. Members of the class have served in the USCG from 1942 to the present. They have significantly contributed to safe navigation on inland and international waters in times of peace and war.

RESEARCHER:

Marc Porter, 2002

PROJECT
INFORMATION:

This project is part of the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), a long-range program to document historically significant engineering and industrial works in the United States. The HAER program is administered by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record Division (HABS/HAER) of the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, E. Blaine Cliver, Chief.

The U.S. Coast Guard Buoy Tenders, 180' Class Recording Project was sponsored by the U.S. Coast Guard, with Captain W. Patrick Lane, Chief, Office of Civil Engineering; Kebby Kelly, Environmental Officer; and Dr. Robert Browning, Historian serving as liaisons. The project was prepared under the direction of HAER Maritime Program Manager Todd Croteau. The historical report was produced by Marc Porter and edited by Justine Christianson, HAER Historian, NCSHPO.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THE U.S. COAST GUARD BUOY TENDERS, 180' IRIS CLASS, SEE:

HAER No. DC-57	U.S. Coast Guard Buoy Tenders, 180' Class
HAER No. DC-60	U.S. Coast Guard Buoy Tenders, 180' Iris Class
HAER No. AK-45	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter FIREBUSH
HAER No. AK-46	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SEDGE
HAER No. AK-47	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SWEETBRIER
HAER No. AK-48	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter WOODRUSH
HAER No. AL-199	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SALVIA
HAER No. CA-309	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter BLACKHAW
HAER No. FL-17	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter REDBUD
HAER No. GU-2	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SASSAFRASS
HAER No. GU-3	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter BASSWOOD
HAER No. HI-61	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter MALLOW
HAER No. MA-152	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter BITTERSWEET
HAER No. ME-68	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SPAR
HAER No. MI-323	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter BRAMBLE
HAER No. MI-328	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter ACACIA
HAER No. MN-98	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SUNDEW
HAER No. NJ-139	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter HORNBEAM
HAER No. OR-118	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter IRIS
HAER No. PR-43	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SAGEBRUSH
HAER No. TX-107	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter BLACKTHORN
HAER No. WA-169	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter MARIPOSA

Zenith Dredge Company built BITTERSWEET. Work began with the keel laying on September 16, 1943. Shipyard workers sent the partially completed vessel sliding off the ways on November 11, 1943. Zenith Dredge Company charged the federal government \$926,769 for BITTERSWEET. The U.S. Coast Guard officially commissioned the new cutter on May 11, 1944.

The tender was assigned to the U.S. Coast Guard's Seventeenth District during World War II. From her base at Ketchikan, she performed AtoN work. She also carried out SAR missions, coming to the rescue of a small naval vessel in January 1945 and saving the crew of a downed army transport plane in March 1945. BITTERSWEET spent the final days of World War II escorting Soviet warships on missions in the Bering Sea.

BITTERSWEET remained in Alaska after World War II. She operated out of Kodiak from 1945 to 1947. She returned to Ketchikan for a brief time in 1947 and then returned to Kodiak until 1964. From 1964 to 1976 she worked out of Ketchikan. Her role in Alaskan waters was to tend AtoN, break ice as needed, and perform SAR when other mariners were in danger. The tender was a busy SAR platform during her Alaskan years, responding to an average of twelve SAR cases per year. She responded to numerous vessels in distress and several aviation accidents, including an incident in 1966 where BITTERSWEET rescued the crew of a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter that crashed during a winter snowstorm. BITTERSWEET also rendered important aid to communities onshore by providing medical aid to remote Alaskan villages.¹

Running aground is an omnipresent risk for buoy tenders, and BITTERSWEET had her share of unplanned encounters with the bottom. The cutter ran aground on uncharted obstacles in 1966 and 1967. Both times the tender managed to free herself and damage was minimal. In April 1968 BITTERSWEET holed herself on an uncharted rock pinnacle while engaged in SAR work. This time, damage was far more serious. The tender's officers intentionally grounded BITTERSWEET to carry out temporary repairs that allowed the vessel to reach a dry dock safely. This grounding was noteworthy not only for the damage, which was seven separate holes in the hull, but also for the civilian response of the accident. Many of Alaska's residents depend on the U.S. Coast Guard to ensure their safety on a daily basis and many of them regard the service highly. When news of the grounding reached nearby settlements a number of residents set out to offer their assistance. Support in the form of commercial divers and other skilled workers helped BITTERSWEET effect temporary repairs and set out for a shipyard in Ketchikan. While a quick civilian response to government vessels in trouble is common in many areas, this response was unusual in that no one charged the government for the services

¹ H.R. Kaplan and James Honer, *This is the Coast Guard: A Pageant of United States History Spanning 182 Years* (Centerville, Maryland: Cornell Maritime Press, 1972), 125.

rendered.²

BITTERSWEET underwent a Major Renovation at the Curtis Bay yard in the latter part of 1976. After the ship left the USCG facility, she went to Woods Hole, Massachusetts to undertake AtoN and icebreaking duties. From her base at Woods Hole, BITTERSWEET participated in two important environmental cleanup efforts after oil tankers ran aground off New England in December 1976 and November 1981.

Like all 180s BITTERSWEET was a multi-mission platform, and the Coast Guard assigned her a variety of tasks. In November 1978 the cutter made its contribution to America's war on drugs by seizing marijuana from a vessel off the coast of Maine. BITTERSWEET's marine safety activities took a different turn in September 1980 when she stood watch over the America's Cup races off Newport, Rhode Island. Collecting scientific data became her primary occupation in the spring months of 1987 as she embarked on an International Ice Patrol near the Grand Banks.

The tender was eventually decommissioned and in September 1997 the government of Estonia purchased the vessel. She is now the only former USCG 180 serving in European waters.³

² Kaplan and Honer, 123-125.

³ Wes Hall, *Historical Context and Statement of Significance: Cactus, Mesquite, and Basswood Classes, United States Coast Guard 180-foot Buoy Tenders (WLBs)* (Castle Hayne, North Carolina: Mid-Atlantic Technology and Environmental Research, 1997), 8.

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- Hall, Wes. *Historical Context and Statement of Significance: Cactus, Mesquite, and Basswood Classes, United States Coast Guard 180-foot Buoy Tenders (WLBs)*. Castle Hayne, North Carolina: Mid-Atlantic Technology and Environmental Research, 1997.
- Kaplan, H.R. and James Honer. *This is the Coast Guard: A Pageant of United States History Spanning 182 Years*. Centerville, Maryland: Cornell Maritime Press, 1972.